



Whitney Museum of American Art

(now Met Breuer) seen from northwest corner at Madison Avenue and 75th Street, New York
(Ezra Stoller, Whitney Museum, New York NY, 1966, ©Ezra Stoller/Esto)

whence the whitney's windows?

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It winks with oddly shaped eyes protruding from the profile of an equally enigmatic face. Or perhaps it's a fortress, hiding secret hunters behind openings like gun ports dotting the Maginot Line. Whatever it seems to resemble, Marcel Breuer's 1966 Whitney Museum is odd. Chief among its eccentricities are its windows, which are noted in nearly every account of the building, however divergent the descriptions. Explained by Breuer as a solution to a problem put before him by the Whitney's board, the windows were, according to him, simply means to "provide a connection to the exterior". The artificial lighting specified in the design brief resulted in spaces optimized for viewing art, but also closed-off, cold, and disorienting. Thus, windows were added to relieve the monotony of the interior. However, were a simple solution truly the motivation for the openings, surely a more common window type would have sufficed. Whence, then, the Whitney's windows? Although many explanations for the Whitney have been offered by various authors, most accounts rely either upon the figural nature of its exterior and consequent resemblance to other things or upon its supposed functionalism. Taking resemblance as its starting point, this paper develops an alternative account by considering the windows photographically.

keywords Breuer, Whitney, Windows

accounting for the whitney's appearance

Described by architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable as “stark and unsettling” and, more famously, “harsh and handsome”¹, the Whitney Museum of American Art that opened in New York in 1966 appeared unusual to onlookers. A top-heavy monolith haphazardly punctured by trapezoidal windows, it had an architectural language all its own and was, consequently, difficult to comprehend. Reinforcing the Whitney's inscrutability to all but those who paid the entrance fee, interior photography of both artwork and the building itself was banned. A handful of photographs, primarily those taken by famed photographer Ezra Stoller, were the sole source of popular imagery until the ban was lifted shortly before the museum's relocation in 2014². Not coincidentally, many of the explanations offered for the building have relied upon interpreting the enigmatic exterior.

Outwardly distinct from nearby architecture, the Whitney has often been compared to more distant things. The building designed by Marcel Breuer and Hamilton Smith has, for example, been said to resemble a “medieval fortress, with oddly shaped windows reminiscent of the gun ports of the Maginot Line”³, or “the famous Egyptian tomb at Saqqara –but upside down”⁴, or a Martian⁵, or a cyclops⁶. Michael Hays, in his introduction to a book of Stoller's photographs of the building, uses similarly figurative terms to account for its peculiarities. However, he insists that the Whitney's vague symbolism is dependent upon its surroundings, not foreign to them. The shape, he claims, is an inversion of the setbacks common to nearby office buildings, while the weight and near-blankness of the granite façade counter glass towers housing ad agencies on Madison Avenue and their equally insubstantial product. Standing in precise contrast, the museum willfully separates itself from commercial buildings and consumerist culture.

The only flaw in the Whitney's design, according to Hays, is the windows. They confuse the true symbolism of the building by allowing for an anthropomorphic reading, and so he discounts them as being thoughtlessly borrowed from Breuer's earlier work. Despite this, the windows do for the interior what the building's massing does for the exterior; they separate the Whitney from the world it inhabits. The largest window, for example, when viewed from Stoller's camera and described by Hays, appears less as an opening than as a painting⁷. It is flattened onto the picture plane of the wall it occupies when seen in one-point perspective, presumably the correct way in which to perceive it, and thus merges with its context of flat art. In doing so, it curtains the gallery off from the street outside by recasting it as painting. In both content and material, then, the Whitney is art.

If art is that which has no utility, then Breuer may have agreed with this assertion. In his own account of the building, he explains that it has no need for functions typically ascribed to windows- ventilation and lighting- as they are provided for by mechanical systems more suited to the requirements of display⁸. Windows, in turn, contradict such programmatic demands of an art museum as maximum wall space and evenly distributed light, necessitating design decisions to minimize their presence. Accordingly, there are only seven windows at the Whitney. Per the architect, their 20° to 25° cants are calculated specifically to prevent direct sunlight from entering the galleries⁹, a claim seemingly sustained by their similarity to windows made earlier in Breuer's career for the same end.

breuer's earlier work

Necessary partners to the large sheets of glass that found increasing use in Modernist architecture, the sun shades Breuer studied and devised throughout his career transitioned from being building accessories to integrated façade elements by 1960. First used in the IBM building at La Gaude¹⁰, the most common sun shade of this sort consists of a rectangular opening at the outer limit of a concrete façade that tapers inward to meet a

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smaller, rectangular glass pane at the interior wall. The recessed window is thus protected from sunlight by the depth of the façade. A less frequently deployed version of this shading strategy is found at the Temple B'nai Jeshurun, completed two years later in 1962. The façade of the Temple protrudes out and up from a piece of rectangular glass set in the interior wall, forming a hood to block the sun.

Similitude between the Temple B'nai Jeshurun's windows and those found in the Whitney, which also protrude, suggests analogous functions, yet the two differ in subtle ways. The projections at the Whitney, which occupy the north and west faces of the museum, angle sideways at the aforementioned 20° to 25° rather than tilting toward the ground. Given their location on the building envelope and the Whitney's location within Manhattan's rotated grid, the angles direct the windows toward true north and away from the sun. Because of this, the windows require no hood and the glass is placed at the outer opening of the façade rather than at the interior wall. Without functional purpose, the placement of the glass relative to the facade takes advantage of the freedom afforded it by directional orientation. Less an explicit translation of performance criteria than a performance of limits, the Whitney's windows carefully deviate from earlier formulations to become exceptions within Breuer's body of work.

They are not, however, the first anomalous windows in the architect's career. Much earlier, following his departure from the Bauhaus, he produced a very different, but equally atypical, window as part of a more extensive interior designed for glass industrialist Gottfried Heinersdorff. Although later dismissive of his own efforts for the project, he liked the window enough to include it at the Paris Salon des Artistes Décorateurs in 1930 and, decades later, to keep a reproduction on his desk in his firm's New York office, from which he and Hamilton Smith designed the Whitney¹¹. The piece Breuer carried with him was made by grinding semi-spherical lenses into a plate of glass, and the resulting "window" offers multiple and moderately varied views of whatever appears through it.

photography

Photographic in nature, the lens window recalls early debates about the medium. As told by Jan von Brevern in his recent writing on the topic, one of these debates centered on the nature of resemblance, specifically within the genre of portraiture. While photographs seem nearly scientific in their ability to reproduce reality, portraits reveal their mimetic insufficiencies. It wasn't uncommon at the advent of photography, and still isn't uncommon, for sitters to remark upon how unlike themselves their likenesses appeared. This difference is illustrated by von Brevern in his essay, "Resemblance After Photography", by a photograph that replicates the effects of Breuer's lens window. The image, taken by Charles Nègre in the mid-nineteenth century, shows the photographer reflected in a *miroir de sorcière*, or a set of convex mirrors positioned in a circle. Each reflection is slightly different, producing eleven distinct portraits of Nègre, none of which, presumably, appear exactly as Nègre does in life.

While the camera's inability to produce images that correspond exactly with how people or things are perceived outside it led some to criticize the medium as a whole, Francis Wey postulated that this quality isn't particular to the instrument. Rather, he said, photography reveals how human perceptions are formed. Mental images are assembled over time from many individual pictures. Each time something is observed, a new picture is added to the composite. In this way, a total image is arrived at through accumulation and any single fragment ceases to be sufficient for describing the thing. If human perception is contingent, then photography must necessarily be so too¹².

This point is illustrated by Breuer's lens window, like Nègre's self-portrait before it, but finds embodiment in the Ford House, designed by Breuer and Walter Gropius a decade

later, in 1939. In the house, every window faces north or south save one- the window in the maid's bedroom; it faces east. Perhaps the architects thought the maid needed a reliable alarm clock, which could be found in the rising sun. More likely, however, is that they regarded windows as a means for orienting inhabitants toward the world outside and each other. All windows but the maid's window not only face the same directions, but are also nearly ribbon windows. While the space behind the windows, or inside the house, is divided into rooms and is not as continuous as the facade might suggest, the position and dimension of each window means that the view from one room overlaps with the view from an adjacent room. As with the lens window, each view is a slightly shifted version of the others.

While all inhabitants share a composite image of the same landscape beyond the Ford House's walls, the maid has another image of a different landscape too. The maid's window, with its unique positioning, distinguishes work (the family's home) from home (the maid's bedroom), and provides separation within an otherwise compact plan. Whereas the private and collective spaces for the family are separated by floor, with living quarters on the ground floor and sleeping above, those for the maid are separated by window. Acting as a sort of wall, the window intimates privacy despite the room's proximity to the family's communal space and provides relief from an all-encompassing profession.

Concerned that the Whitney's galleries might be too sterile or claustrophobic, Breuer offered another explanation for their windows. The windows, he said, serve as relief from what would otherwise be a completely contained interior¹³. A museum is not a house, and what required respite was not a domestic occupation. Instead, the inescapable presence pervading an art museum is the art itself. To create a space outside of art, Breuer did not simply provide a physical room devoid of visual curiosities, but rather created an alternative visual space. Art hung on walls asks to be looked at in a particular way, namely frontally. The glass of the windows, which previously had no reason for placement at the exterior of the facade other than to express its own freedom, finds purpose here. By being positioned at the exterior so that it tilts away from interior walls, the glass distinguishes itself from neighboring paintings and cues a shift in sight. Furthering the effect, the panes of glass at the Whitney are trapezoidal, a shape unused for any other window at any time in Breuer's career. Because one side of each trapezoid is shorter than the other, the panes appear to recede in space, amplifying their tilt. No matter where one stands relative to the windows, they are out of plane with the body.

When photographing the streets of Paris, Eugene Atget took a similar approach to framing storefronts as Breuer does to constructing a window. A combination of narrow streets and mechanical limitations may have been partly responsible for the slightly off-angles at which his photographs appear, but his use of the imperfect, non-frontal angle was also a device for constructing a particular, non-artistic way of looking. A documentarian at the turn of the twentieth century, Atget set out to record all of Paris and sell it back one image at a time to painters, illustrators, libraries, publishers, architects, and anyone else in the market. His images are generally of very ordinary and imperfect things, and are printed in ordinary and imperfect ways. According to Molly Nesbit, this insistence on commonplace, flawed, and insignificant subjects and techniques tallies with Atget's insistence that his work was not art and he not an artist. In her telling, he refused to put his name on photographs purchased by Man Ray precisely for this reason¹⁴. Atget's subject matter and manner of producing images made him a figure for later artists wishing to resist, in the spirit of the Sixties and Seventies, the status of art for their work (while still making art, of course)¹⁵. Photographers such as Ed Ruscha and William Eggleston have followed in his stead, whether knowingly or not, and Atget's style and documentarian use of photography has become a stand-in for evading traditional registers of art.

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Citing the “danger of l’art pour l’art museum”, Breuer specified rough and unsophisticated materials for the Whitney’s galleries. Otherwise, he said, “the general impression will be too clinical, too remote from the role of art in Society”¹⁶. The interiors of the windows were treated with equal indifference; they are not painstakingly detailed, but rather include such unremarkable and ungainly things as power outlets. Thus, in both the way it frames the exterior and its acceptance of imperfection on the interior, the Whitney finds its place in the world it inhabits. Its windows are not for pictures or paintings, but instead situate art relative to life while carefully avoiding the conflation of one with the other. Museum and street exist in the same space, but not simultaneously. In a presentation drawing made prior to the museum’s completion, a small crowd can be seen inhabiting the building. All look intently at art, except those standing in front of the fourth floor window. They look at each other, oblivious to the paintings and sculpture which surround them.

endnotes

1. Ada Louise Huxtable, “Harsh and Handsome”, *New York Times*, September 8, 1966, 49.
 2. The ban was lifted in May of 2013 and the museum relocated in to its current location in October of 2014. The building formerly occupied by the Whitney is now, as of March, 2016, the Met Breuer, which continues to allow personal photography. For the sake of clarity, the Breuer building is referred to in this paper by its original name: the Whitney.
 3. Christopher Gray, “The Controversial Whitney Museum”, *New York Times*, November 11, 2010, accessed November 19, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/14/realestate/14Scapes.html>.
 4. Sanka Knox, “Madison Avenue Now has a Castle”, *New York Times*, July 23, 1966, 43.
 5. John Canaday and Ada Louise Huxtable, “Art: The Whitney Museum Shows What It Can Do ... In the Right Building”, *New York Times*, October 2, 1966, 139.
 6. Charles W. Millard, “The Great Grey Whitney”, *The Hudson Review*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (Winter 1966-1967): 616-619.
 7. Beatriz Colomina has also described the relationship between Modernist windows and painting. See, for example, “A Window with a View”, in *Privacy and Publicity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996), 128-139.
 8. Marcel Breuer, “Comments at the Presentation of the Whitney Museum Project”, November 12, 1963.
 9. Milton Esterow, “Whitney Museum Holds a Preview”, *New York Times*, September 8, 1966, 49.
 10. Robert F. Gatje, *Marcel Breuer: A Memoir* (New York: Monacelli Press, Inc., 2000), 104, 178.
 11. *Ibid.*, 42-43.
 12. Jan Von Brevren, “Resemblance After Photography”. *Representations* 123 (Summer 2013): 1-22
 13. Marcel Breuer, “Comments at the Presentation of the Whitney Museum Project”, November 12, 1963.
- For a more thorough account of Conceptualist photography and its conflicted position toward art, see Jeff Wall “Marks of Indifference: Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art”. In *Jeff Wall, Selected Essays and Interviews*. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2007, 143-168.
14. Molly Nesbit, *Atget’s Seven Albums*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992.

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Sarah Blankenbaker. Is a Clinical Assistant Professor at the Univeristy of Illinois at Chicago School of Architecture. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in mathematics and visual art from the University of Chicago. As an undergraduate student, Sarah was drawn to the architecture she encountered while photographing buildings and spaces as part of her coursework and subsequently departed for Los Angeles to study at the Southern California Institute of Architecture (SCI-Arc). There, she earned a Master's of Architecture and a Thesis Award for her work on translating photographs into buildings. Sarah has worked for Terreform in New York and Zago Architecture in Los Angeles. While at Zago Architecture, she was part of a team that participated in *Foreclosed: Rehousing the American Dream* at MoMA in New York. In 2011, she returned to Chicago to join the faculty at the UIC School of Architecture, where she was the 2015-16 Garofalo Fellow. Through the fellowship, Sarah continued her research into the role photography has and can have in architecture, and part of that research is included in her paper, "Whence the Whitney's Windows?"